

Plusone Mentoring, YMCA Kirkcaldy: Sharing Practice

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Introduction

This is a brief introduction in order to provide a context for this paper. The purpose of Plusone Mentoring is to support children and young people who have offended or who are at risk of offending. It is an early intervention approach at a critical time in their lives, which is based on the development of a mentoring relationship between the young person and a volunteer mentor, one which “gives young people support in a non-threatening way, creating an informal environment in which the mentee feels confident to discuss their problems openly” (Robb, Mair, 2013: 1).

The young people accepted onto the project are aged between 8 and 14, normally with one offence or regarded as being at high risk of offending. Young people are referred by social work services, local schools and the Youth Offender Management Group, a multi-agency partnership in Fife.

The young people are matched with a volunteer mentor who meets with them once a week, spends time with them on an activity and, in conversations developed over time, encourages them to engage in school and community-based activities, and to take a more positive approach to their lives. There is a YMCA Scotland wide Plusone, but this paper is based on the work of Plusone at the YMCA Kirkcaldy which covers the areas of Kirkcaldy, Levenmouth, Glenrothes, Cowdenbeath and Lochgelly in Fife. There are two programme managers, each with different geographical locations. Since 2012 the project has been funded by the Big Lottery Fund and additionally by the Fife Community Safety Partnership.

Thirty-four young people sustained a mentoring relationship during 2014 and almost 90% reduced their offending behaviour; 85% increased their attendance at school and maintained their educational attainment, and all engaged in community-based activities. All young people reported an improvement in relationships at home. In 2014, twenty eight new volunteers were recruited and trained onto the programme – of the current mentors almost two thirds are women and 85% are aged under 45.

This Discussion Paper

This is an information and knowledge sharing paper which provides an account and analysis of the key features of the model of the project which contribute to its success. It is informed by the knowledge the main author has built up over two years of working with the project staff, meeting mentors, some young people, scrutinising all the documentation, contributing ideas, and writing annual reviews/reports. The primary purpose of this paper is to locate the project processes and its good and effective practice within credible academic and practice approaches which fit broadly within the domain of community education. Additionally, it is about future proofing so that the project can contribute to professional knowledge and also in order that the project model may be replicated and transferred to other settings. This is in keeping with the notion of a community of practice (Wenger, McDermott, Snyder, 2002) about creating, expanding and exchanging knowledge, developing individual capabilities and sharing practice.

The review processes we have been using over the past two years correspond with the concept of the sharing of ideas, the enhancement of practice and the asking of challenging questions. During this time we have evolved into a community of practice which is being replicated now in other YMCA Kirkcaldy initiatives.

This discussion focuses on four key features of the practice approach and includes illustrations of practice and makes a link with academic literature.

The Matching of the Young Person with the Mentor

Prior to matching a young person with a volunteer, the programme managers gather information and get to know mentors from one to one meetings and time spent on

training. Volunteers make clear their wishes about mentoring and their own needs. The information gathered about the young person, from their referrers and meeting the young person and their family, will inform decisions about the best match. At this stage the programme manager will be considering the match in relation to the logistics such as location and availability and also the qualities that matter in terms of a successful mentoring relationship. Considerations about gender, age, the personalities of the mentor and the young person, the skills, interests and abilities, for example in sport, of the volunteer, all come into the matching decision along with their skills and abilities to meet the behavioural challenges presented. The referral forms indicate that behaviour is a key referring reason, including volatile behaviour in the home, at school and the community. As soon as the referral is accepted, the programme manager makes a home visit to go through the health and safety issues and the needs of the young person within the mentoring relationship. In one example, to ensure that a correct match would be made, the programme manager spent time with the young person on an outdoor activity to understand better his needs. Every effort is made to make a match that will be sustained for the duration of the process so that the trust in professional relationships can be enhanced.

Relationship-building between the Mentor and the Young Person

Trust is central to this and patience is a quality which is particularly important for the mentor to possess in order to build trust to a deep level. The training provided by the project emphasises a number of underpinning ideas drawn from the person-centred/child-centred approach. A key idea, which was developed by Carl Rogers over eighty years ago, is that people heal whilst in relationships with others who have empathy for their situation. This is the important thinking behind the approach of Plusone. The core conditions of the approach developed by Rogers are: unconditional positive regard; accurate empathy; congruence, and genuineness (as summarised by Howe, 2008: 175). Putting these ideas into practice, the mentor enables the young person to express feelings, encourages them to acknowledge these, explores what they mean for himself/herself and others when these are expressed, and then suggests that different and more positive actions and expressions of feelings are considered. Mentors and school professionals in their feedback to programme co-

ordinators attest to the changed behaviours of the young person, especially after about six months of mentoring. This suggests the success of the underpinning theoretical approach of the model due to the time and patience devoted to establishing the right relationship conditions and the skills, values and attitudes of the mentors. This approach is informed also by social work theory about relationship-based social work which is about the relationship we have with the participants in our services and much less about the interventions we make (Howe: 2008). Howe links this up with the model of being an emotionally intelligent social worker, who is someone with a well-developed sense of self and he suggests that: “The reference point for an understanding of others is one’s self” (2008: 185).

Referral and monitoring forms along with feedback from school professionals identify a concern with behaviour, which is generally negative, often angry and aggressive, labelled as anti-social behaviour in the school, home and community, and the information provided suggests that the young person is unable to deal with their feelings as more often than not they react in a way which causes distress to themselves or others. With some young people they retreat into themselves, into escape or avoidance behaviours, withdrawing from social contact and friendship groups. Professionals and volunteer mentors working with young people need to have an understanding of emotions, especially negative emotions which have been expressed over time, from childhood into adolescence so that they as mentors can build an effective relationship with the young person and address feelings.

The following examples from referral forms and notes from mentors illustrate the importance of feelings and the mentor’s working with these in collaboration with the young person. Mind-mapping is a tool used by the mentors with encouragement from the programme managers; this is a useful approach for exploring emotions and with using additional techniques, from the model of mindfulness, the young person is facilitated to slow down and reflect upon their usual responses to situations. Slowing down is an idea mirrored in the work of Howe (2009) when he says that the making of lists and breaking problems down into manageable chunks helps in this process. Frequently in the school or community a young person becomes drawn into a verbal

or physical altercation, considering this as normal behaviour. The mentor challenges their actions, and spends time with them discussing the consequences and the potential for different reactions. With the mind-mapping tool, young people are able to use a visual way of expressing their main concerns, their significant family relationships and their hopes for the present and the future.

Goal-setting is raised by the mentor after about three months and this is a joint undertaking between the young person and the mentor. Problem-solving is a key idea within community education which begins with the experiences of the young person. Task-centred approaches are practised especially in social work where the worker enables an individual to set goals which are limited, realistic and potentially achievable. The mentor and the young person use a stepping stone approach to goal-setting (an idea again mirrored in the work of Howe, 2009). This links in with the previous idea of slowing down the action and Howe suggests that this is shown to be very effective when working with people "... who feel anxious, overwhelmed and at sea" (2009: 78).

A self-esteem and self-confidence questionnaire is used by the mentors and completed at intervals to determine how the young person feels about themselves and their abilities. This forms a focus for conversations with mentors and for recording progress to the programme manager.

Sustaining the Relationship over Time

Counselling relationships may last over many months and even years but in the current professional areas of community learning and development and social work, relationships are time-limited and often quite short. The mentoring relationship in its ideal form is expected to last for twelve months and some last slightly less and others more. Sustaining the relationship over time brings its challenges and the underpinning person-centred model described above is relevant to this. Informed by the work of Rogers and others, Heather Smith and Mark Smith outline an approach of relevance to Plusone. In the introductory paragraph to a chapter entitled 'Being

Wise', Smith and Smith say that people who are called to be helpers (a term used by the authors),

are often not only trying to live life as well as they can and know themselves, but are also experienced as reflective, knowledgeable and discerning people. They are able to listen, talk and be with others in ways that allow experience, in that famous phrase of John Dewey's, to be emancipated and enlarged (1933, p.340). In other words, they are people of wisdom. (Smith and Smith, 2008: 57)

They identify a number of characteristics of helpers: people who are open to seeking the truth, when in conversations they listen, reaching an understanding about what the other person is saying and then come to conclusions. The capacity to reflect is an important component and this involves sustained reflection over time, so that insights develop which contribute to sound judgements and learning from accumulated experiences in order that more informed actions may take place in the future. Being knowledgeable involves knowing about oneself, about people and about the way we are organised in our communities and society. These three elements of being knowledgeable are essential for the mentoring relationship; knowing and accepting one's own feelings and being able to moderate reactions to situations that are unfamiliar and a challenge are especially important, as many of the young people and their families live complex lives and are in relationships that are a challenge to themselves and others. Being open-minded about these is another significant attribute to hold. The young people in the mentoring relationship relate to many local institutions and networks, including school, community organisations, social service agencies, health services, police. It is essential to be mindful of this in the relationship, and of the impact that these interactions have on the young person.

Discussions with programme managers, meetings with mentors and the records of a wide range of situations and encounters met whilst mentoring suggest that these qualities come into play in the relationship. The mentor requires some of these qualities, but the programme managers require all of them and they need to be able to

discover and discern what is at the heart of the situation and to take the correct actions (the concept of discernment is used by Smith and Smith, 2008).

These qualities are demonstrated also with the inter-professional relationships between staff and social work and education professionals, where information is shared to come to agreement about the best way forward with the young person. One example was about a young person who had a low tolerance level of other people, and who was enabled in the school setting and the mentoring relationship to express their feelings and to find an interest more connected to their needs, and which would not trigger negative actions. The mentors require to be alert to what might arise in an informal conversation and respond appropriately – in one instance a young person was speaking about concerns with relationships within the family; the mentor listened, but realised that this was not the right time to probe, so left it open for the topic to be discussed at a more appropriate time.

The supportive relationship between the programme manager and the mentor

There is a wide range of supervision models in the social work and community learning and development professions. To some extent they all share the basic functions of supervision developed by Kadushin (1992), which are administrative, educational and supportive (as outlined by Smith, M.K. 1996, 2005). The supervision model is an important feature of the relationship between mentors and programme managers as evidenced in the write-up of discussions and group meetings.

Administrative functions include co-ordinating activities, booking venues, responding to phone calls and emails. One-to-one meetings take place every three months and discussion can focus on concerns about practical matters, but usually it is about a challenge in the mentoring relationship or in the life of the young person. For example, mentors ask for guidance about how they might deal with an issue raised about other members of the family or a concern about school. This might lead to the programme manager making a home visit to the family to raise the issue, and then if appropriate pass the concern onto another agency. Most of the support sessions focus on managing the mentoring relationship, with setting boundaries, with guiding the

mentor towards the mutuality of the relationship – providing advice on something practical like taking turns in making choices about activities.

The relationship between the mentor and the staff member is mirrored well in the work of Hewson (2008), who suggests that not only is the supervisory relationship educative and supportive but that it is challenging and collegial, he says it is “... challenging because it takes us out of our comfort zone; and collegial as it is a relationship of equals, albeit one more resourced than the other” (2008: 35).

The notion of containing anxiety is important because of the complexity of the lives of the young people. It is important that situations are not allowed to grow in the minds of the mentor, thus becoming more of an issue than the reality. In the words of Wilmot, the worker (in this case the mentor) needs to stay with “the original event” (Wilmot, 2008: 95). The support and supervision relationship is effectively one which gives space to the volunteers and allows them to explore their anxieties and contain these within the support and supervision setting.

Conclusions

This discussion paper has been a presentation of the significant features of the Plusone practice approach which have contributed to its successes. It has been about capturing this and sharing it with a wider audience so that the following elements of the ideas from the community of practice paradigm are evidenced. These are the:

- discussion of practice and debate about topics
- sharing of knowledge and practice – in our broad professional and volunteer domain
- enhancement of practice
- strengthening of individual capabilities: Plusone as a project and leverage of professional development within the YMCA Kirkcaldy.

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